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THE MILITARY ATTACHE IN THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICE

(Source: Die Welkriegspropaganda; German)

13 July 1951

R E S T R I C T E D

R E S T R I C T E D

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-- Bussio von Bismarck, Lt. Col. (Ret.)

Even during peacetime a General Staff officer was assigned as military attache to most German embassies and legations. It was the task of this officer to act as an official observer of the army in the country to which he was sent. The military attache was the only person within the legation - except for the minister - who had the right and the duty to express his opinions, which were reflected in his report. His reports were submitted to the Kaiser. Since he based his statements preferably on military sources, in other words, sources other than those used by the legation, the reports from these two sources frequently differed in their results. It often happened that the military attache was better informed than the minister who was his superior. In most cases this can probably be traced to the fact that his informants - soldiers - were more outspoken than those of the diplomat. Since it was often impossible to separate the two spheres of activity - political and politico-military - this constituted a source of friction between diplomats and soldiers, and the military attache was usually a rather troublesome personality. In my time, while in Bern, no differences of a serious nature arose, either in peace or in war, since the ambassador and the military attache maintained a daily candid exchange of views, and since their sources of intelligence were exactly the same in a country where every citizen is a soldier.

In peacetime the German military attaches were not concerned at all with actual espionage, as far as it was related to the active intelligence service, and in time of war they were concerned with it only indirectly. This restraint went so far in peacetime that any espionage activity was directly forbidden to the military attache. However, that was only for the good, for direct relations with agents would have always eventually exposed him, and would have shaken the confidence which he urgently needed in order to properly perform his duty to cultivate friendly relations with the foreign army. On the whole, the other countries have acted in a similar manner during peacetime. The Russians constituted a constant exception to this rule, and therefore were not particularly popular. The Swiss army had no secrets from us which could be of any interest whatsoever to us, but the suspicion against the German military attache was particularly great in France and in the other countries which later on were hostile to us. There, our foreign colleagues, the military attaches of other countries, were the main sources of information. Once a foreign military attache in Paris, -- I believe it was the Belgian -- told me that the

R E S T R I C T E D

distrust of the German attache went so far that if he were to ask a French Officer whether his uniform had 10 buttons the answer would undoubtedly be: "I don't know, it is possible, but it could also be different."

Generally speaking, even in wartime we adhered to the idea that the military attache should not be concerned with actual espionage. It was not really in the interests of the espionage service, for an agent who is frequently seen with a military attache would be immediately conspicuous and his usefulness would be ruined forever. Intelligence reports were received by the military attache from other sources.

During peacetime my reports, generally speaking, referred to the Swiss Army, and incorporated many facts interesting to the soldier, but certainly nothing world-shaking. Before the start of the hostilities only a few reports were received from there which might have caused a person to prick up his ears. For example, in early spring 1914, the French military attache suddenly submitted an offer to the Swiss General Staff in return for a promise of absolute neutrality, under which in case of war France would guarantee to Switzerland unhindered passage of grain and other foodstuffs, since that country would otherwise be completely cut off from the world markets. The French military attache had expressed the opinion that war would break out before long, for the oppressed brethren of the French in Alsace were demanding liberation. The same colleague expressed himself very optimistically, from his point of view, in a discussion with a high Swiss officer, regarding Italian adherence to its alliance. France would not worry on that account. If, contrary to expectations, the Italians should intervene, they would receive "une bonne raclée", a good beating. And, lastly, several days before the beginning of the general mobilization I found out that training had suddenly stopped in the camp at Valdahon, a French troop-training camp near the French - Swiss border, and that the troops were hurriedly returned to their garrisons.

But matters like these were only the exception. The situation changed at the outbreak of the war. Switzerland had declared for neutrality and was the first among all European armies to mobilize its troops actually and officially. Intelligence service of any kind in favor of one of the belligerent countries was forbidden and punishable; telegraph and telephones were monitored, coded telegrams were permitted only to and from extra-territorial legations. Then, of course, it was no longer possible to make use of many a beautiful arrangement for intelligence services which the countries about to enter into a state of war had made during peacetime with a long-range view in mind.

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German and French agents were imprisoned in Basel and Western Switzerland. An army of diplomats and refugees from all imaginable countries were entering Switzerland. A flood of information and rumors spread all over the country. The longer the war lasted the surer became the doors opening from Germany into the outside world. In view of that situation, the otherwise innocuous position of military attaché in Switzerland took on an importance which no one had imagined beforehand and for which no preparations had been made in peacetime.

At first I was all by myself; not even a messenger was at my disposal who could carry my letters and telegrams to the post office. It was not until the end of 1914 that the first assistance arrived in the person of a doctor of political science exempted from military service, a very intelligent man, but, in military matters, a veritable child. Now demands were continually directed to the military attaché on the greatest possible variety of subject matters; his staff was continually enlarged until, at the end of the war, it had grown to 80 persons.

A tremendous flow of information poured in from all quarters upon the representative of the German army in Switzerland. People, Germans, Swiss, and others, came forward, of their own free will, from motives of patriotism or friendship for Germany or because they hoped to find a good new source of income by offering their alleged pieces of information. It was impossible and useless to transmit all of it. To the extent, most of it was bound to appear worthless. The very matters which the informant thought to be of utmost importance proved to be entirely insignificant. It goes without saying that all of that was discarded; however, sufficient information remained which might contain a grain of truth and importance, which might perhaps be a valuable piece in the jigsaw puzzle of the intelligence section of the Army High Command.

The press, from Switzerland as well as from the belligerent countries, was of greater importance, since the papers arrived in Bern several days earlier than they were received in Germany. Even though they were censored, now and then something would slip through which was interesting and important to the conduct of the war. "La Vie Parisienne", a salacious weekly, which to the uninitiated reader would appear to be anything but a source of military information, curiously enough was for a long time an important source of intelligence. Through its personal columns

R E S T R I C T E D

innumerable "poilus" were looking for female sponsors who were to provide them with "loving gifts" in the field and with "gifts of love" on furlough. The soldiers included particulars regarding their units and postal locations, and systematic analysis of these addresses furnished important data on the changing order of battle of enemy troops.

It was not the large newspapers which furnished material of military value, since they were most severely restricted by censorship; on the contrary, it was the smallest, most insignificant papers of the border towns on both sides which occasionally carried information on troop movements; by themselves, the items were without value, but the cumulative effect could be of vital importance.

But all this is by far overshadowed by the information which I received through my personal - to some extent extremely friendly - connections with higher Swiss officers. I had to be in almost daily official contact with them even during the war, in the interest of both countries. Naturally, a conversation easily arose among the colleagues on the topic of utmost current interest, i.e., the war. A good deal could be learned in this way; it did not matter whether the partner intended to impart the information or not. The Swiss had much information, some of it hidden by the warring nations from their opponents. They were able to look down from the Jura Mountains, where their frontier guards were located, into the plains of the "trouee de Belgort", upon the flanks of the French and German armies. Switzerland also conducted an extensive intelligence service in the belligerent countries. Swiss militia officers, businessmen in civilian life, traveled there "on business" and looked around in the country under very definite instructions. In this manner I was informed of the evacuation of the French army on the right flank from Alsace by the end of August 1914. From the Jura Mountains heavy train traffic had been observed all day long. Naturally it was impossible to conclude the destination of the trains from their looks, but it was quite possible to see that the troops were being shipped toward the west. Even that much was information of utmost importance.

In this manner I heard a lot on the conditions in the interior of France. These reports were always fully dependable, in contrast to reports from agents, which had to be verified. I believe it was in spring 1918 that I received a telegram from the High Command of the army stating that according to all reports

R E S T R I C T E D

received a famine was imminent in France. This did not coincide in any way with the picture which I had formed of the circumstances in which the enemy found himself. Naturally I wired immediately my contrary opinion. Beyond that I directed my attention to this question. I explained my opinion to my friends as if I, myself, believed in the imminent famine in France. I expressed fears regarding the food situation in Switzerland, which, for a long time, was being supplied principally through the French seaport of Cette only. Of course, I encountered lively contradiction at first; however, I was instrumental, through the assurance in my attitude, in raising doubts, and as a result the situation in France was reexamined through numerous inquiries. Soon I received the most definite confirmation of the correctness of my real opinion, namely, that France was a land of plenty as compared with starved Germany, in spite of some restrictions in the food supply. It is evident, without further elaboration, how immensely important it is for the conduct of war that the highest authorities should have a correct picture of the enemy's internal situation. It can easily be seen how the sum of readily optimistic reports from agents and the intelligence obtained from battle-weary prisoners of war can lead to a result which is exactly the opposite of the true situation.

It was extraordinarily valuable for my activities that, on my insistence, I was kept constantly informed by the High Command of the Army regarding its interpretation of the situation from both the purely military and the political angle. In addition I constantly received summations on what was known regarding the order of battle of the enemy army on the Western Front and in Italy. Thereby I received, on the one hand, a firmer basis for judging the information which I received from third parties. On the other hand, I also gained some knowledge which I was able to offer the Swiss, to reciprocate their favors, in a manner of speaking. Naturally, they did not talk to me merely to be polite or because of my beautiful eyes, but mainly because they figured to gain some information from me. Moreover, we had cogent reasons for desiring Swiss neutrality, even more than the others. The open flank of our army and half of Southern Germany were protected only by the Swiss border. Therefore, solely in my own interest, I had to consider it my task to call the attention of the Swiss to all enemy measures from which an

R E S T R I C T E D

invasion of Switzerland by the French could possibly be inferred.

It is understood that it always had to be carefully considered what was and was not suitable for "confidential" communication. The responsibility certainly was not small, for we always had to consider that the enemy would hear about it, and the enemy camp was also very large in Switzerland. It was shown by the so-called "colonels' trial", which at that time caused an immense commotion and remained a favorite means of agitation of the West Swiss newspapers until the end of the war, that the circles hostile to Germany in Switzerland were always lying in wait to deal a blow to those among their compatriots who held different opinions. The Swiss General Staff has always considered it expedient to decipher the telegrams of foreign military attaches. At first they started with the Russian telegrams, probably because they were the easiest to decipher. A West Swiss decipherer was appointed to that position. Then they started on mine, and the curious fact developed that part of the contents of the Russian telegrams, as well as other information which I could have gathered only from the Swiss General Staff, were contained therein. With "pangs of conscience" the decipherer went to the director of the "Gazette de Lausanne", a newspaper which was more French than the French themselves. In "patriotic indignation" the director, on his part, turned to the Federal Council. An investigation was conducted, a trial was held. The accused colonels admitted that a certain exchange of information had taken place between them and me which was in the interests of Swiss defense. But the neutrality was violated, the two colonels were removed from their positions and retired. The fact that I personally remained in my post in spite of the cries of fury from the West Swiss press, instigated by the representatives of the Allied Powers, can be understood only when one considers that the investigation conducted then, as well as all similar cases later on, did not prove in the least that the above-mentioned Swiss officers were under undue influence.

As already previously mentioned, the military attache, at least the one in Switzerland, was not concerned with actual espionage; above all he did not maintain his own agents. I do not know how the situation was in other neutral countries where the legislation differed from that of Switzerland. For example, in Spain

R E S T R I C T E D

R E S T R I C T E D

the connections with the homeland were more or less cut off. It is self-evident that the military attache must have been forced to build up an organization different from what was either possible or necessary in Switzerland.

It is obvious that during the course of the war years I met up with quite a number of spies and traitors. Even the most neutral Swiss cannot blame the military attache of a belligerent power if he does not close his ears when a more or less interesting personality wants to impart his knowledge. Such a meeting never took place outside the extra-territorial rooms of the legation or my office. That would have been too dangerous, because one could never know whether a provocation was involved - a subject which I shall discuss later on. I could never expose the legation or myself to the danger which important German interests would suffer if someone should be caught in the act of spying, a manifest violation of Swiss law.

The most interesting meeting of that kind undoubtedly was one with an actual French Deputy. He had appeared secretly at the legation in order to obtain German support for his political purposes, if I am not mistaken. Since he was also a member of the Chamber Committee for Army Affairs, and the French High Command, like it or not, had to give very exact reports to this group of deputies, I was called in. In the course of a lengthy conversation he stated an immense number of important facts on French armaments and intentions which, as was later on proved, were absolutely true. This man, a traitor for political reasons, did not enjoy a long life after that. A package with 100,000 Swiss francs was found in his coat pocket in the cloakroom of the Chamber of Deputies, and that sealed his doom.

The cases are innumerable where it was necessary to support the German intelligence service. Exact knowledge of Swiss conditions made it possible to indicate to the German intelligence offices 1) the most suitable roads for agents to use for crossing the frontier, an operation which was becoming more and more difficult; and 2) proper conduct in Switzerland. In many cases it was possible to call the attention of the German headquarters, or of the person concerned, himself, to the dangers threatening one or another agent. Now and then we succeeded in putting the person threatened out of harm's way in time,

- 7 -

R E S T R I C T E D

R E S T R I C T E D

by our own measures. By frequent consultations with the directors of the intelligence service - consultations which always took place in Germany or in the theater of operations - close contact was maintained with the entire organization.

In spite of strict prohibitions, it happened time and again that agents of the German intelligence service appeared in the office of the military attache, either to entrust information of alleged extreme urgency to the faster official channels, or because they were afraid of crossing the border into Germany. As previously indicated, such a call was always dangerous for the visitor; for the office of the military attache was under constant surveillance, both by the Swiss military police bent on catching spies, and by the agents of the Allied Powers.

During the entire war, people would offer their services to the intelligence service for missions in enemy countries. Yes, we listened to them, so to speak subjected them to a preliminary examination - gradually a card index was set up on all those under suspicion for any reason whatsoever - but I never gave a mission to any one of them. The only thing that could happen was that we might facilitate the border crossing for these people. They would always be sent to a fixed point where the German border authorities, accordingly advised, would take them in hand. Only in that way was it possible to prevent the entry of perhaps undesirable elements and the exposure of the military attache. It goes without saying that the press hostile to Germany has always made different assertions. There was no espionage trial in Switzerland against German agents in which the newspapers did not report that the German military attache was exposed or unmasked as the "great organizer" of German espionage. In essence that was the gist of the Swiss attitude toward the war. All French-speaking Swiss formed a closed united front against the Central Powers. There was no newspaper in Western Switzerland, from the "Gazette de Lausanne" to the most insignificant little paper in the Jura Mountains, which was not almost daily full of agitation against Germany. To them neutrality meant support of French interests at any price. That made it infinitely more difficult for the German intelligence service,

- 8 -

R E S T R I C T E D

R E S T R I C T E D

which, like it or not, had to go by way of Switzerland. On the other hand, German Switzerland, which included the majority of the population, remained altogether aloof. It required quite a special occasion for them to speak up. Trials against Allied spies would have remained completely in the darkness of the trial courts if we, on our own initiative, had not from time to time lighted a torch to show that they are as numerous as ours.

However, the army of men and women who were sent to Switzerland by all imaginable German offices to make observations there was extremely annoying. Without any doubt, huge waste of strength and money occurred in this field. Particularly during the latter war years, when travel to foreign countries was very difficult because of the declining value of money, it was easy for anyone to receive a travel permit who stated that he could be useful to the intelligence service in any manner whatsoever. Almost every businessman travelling to Switzerland on his own affairs was given some task of observation. Worst of all were those persons who were sitting around Swiss luxury hotels at public expense, allegedly becoming acquainted with and obtaining information from Allied diplomats and other hostile foreigners. It was really self-evident that not many results could come from such effort. Fortunately, the reports of impressions, and anything which appeared at all important, were transmitted to me by the Central Office for my expert opinion. I never obtained any new knowledge from any of it, but there was much false information which had to be rectified in order to protect the homeland from erroneous views. Usually it was hotel or beer gossip, matters which were published in every Swiss newspaper, rumors without any basis whatsoever, criticisms of German representation in foreign countries, and the like. All these people really were just trying to prove their right to exist.

In this connection I like to think of my friends, the "provocators". They were the ladies and gentlemen who were sent to me by the French or any other enemy colleagues or enemy intelligence service. The particularly eager West Swiss press was active in that regard, too. These "provocators" came with the idea of gaining insight into the methods of the German intelligence service, to feed

R E S T R I C T E D

R E S T R I C T E D

as false information, to be recruited by us and thus to become acquainted with real German agents, or merely to lure me or one of my subordinate officers into some compromising meeting.

In the beginning the ladies in particular were casting their nets after me; it goes without saying that they were equipped with extraordinary natural charms, blond and brunette, to suit any taste. Later on, after these tactics did not seem to be effective, we occasionally offered their services.

In view of the operational methods already described, and the distrustful caution exercised by us, the successes of the enemy in this respect were probably not too significant. Some of their methods were altogether clumsy. For instance, in Spring 1915 I received an open telegram from Petrograd (Leningrad), by way of Paris, which arrived containing my full name. This telegram, which was disclosed when the Russian secret files were made public by the revolutionaries in 1917, is supposed to have originated from an agent of the Okhrana, the Russian Tsarist secret police, who reportedly had approached various German authorities in several neutral countries as "agent provocateur". The publication of his purported "confession" in 1917 in the Russian, French, and West Swiss press once again provided an opportunity for the latter to howl with fury against the "machinations of and violations of neutrality by the German legation". Needless to say, there had been no follow-up of the telegram, and the legation was in a position to deny formally any participation in the so-called conspiracy.

In early summer 1918 an alleged secret agent of the French General Staff - by the way, a very sinister personality - made the following proposal: since the politicians of both countries could not agree on peace, the general staff officers from both sides were to meet on neutral territory, in Western Switzerland, of all places - that was the condition. No doubt they would come to a speedy agreement. Peculiarly enough, there were some gentlemen in the legation who were of the opinion that this offer should be accepted. Naturally, on my part I denied any support to this obvious provocation.

It remains to be briefly mentioned how the military attache in Switzerland accomplished the transmission of intelligence to the authorities in Germany. In the beginning, it was the most primitive proposition imaginable. At first, neither courier service nor any other extraterritorial messengers were available

R E S T R I C T E D

to the German legation. All letters were sent by Swiss mail to the Consulate at Basel and from there dispatched across the border by messenger. To be sure, the military attache had a code for telegraphic communication. On the occasion of the above-mentioned "colonels' trial" it was evident just how harmless it was. A considerably better one took its place. Gradually a few official messengers were assigned to the legation, who travelled daily from Bern to the German border station. In the course of time they were supplemented by five courier officers assigned to the military attache. That way, two safe daily contacts were finally established with Weill-Leopoldshoche and one with the German Consulate in Western Switzerland. During the last years [of the war] coded telegrams - with few exceptions - were sent only by couriers. After installation of the teletype at the German border station they were not delayed at all. In particularly important cases the couriers traveled all the way to the General Headquarters, to which I was also summoned from time to time for personal reports; or, when the situation demanded it, I went there on my own initiative. All these measures were necessitated after it was definitely established that the enemy powers were endeavoring to bribe Swiss postal officials.

In the preceding an attempt has been made to give the reader an approximate description of the activities of the German military attache in connection with the intelligence service, which, after all, was only a part of his sphere of activities, which was continuously expanding during the course of the war. Our enemies appear to have considered these activities as somewhat harmful. Since the effective date of the Versailles Treaty, the German military attache, like so many other things, has been a thing of the past.